

Seeing ideology: a student guide to classics of visual media analysis

by Chuck Kleinhans

The remarkable progress of visual culture analysis in classrooms over the past few decades means that many young people have both a practical knowledge of image making and circulation, thanks to smartphone cameras and social media platforms, and a critical understanding of how to analyze everyday images. But for anyone wanting to gain a deeper analysis of still and moving images, it is worthwhile to return from time to time to some of the key works that founded the dynamic trend. I want to use this occasion to introduce or remind readers of the origins of visual culture critique.

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Barthes' 1957 book (English trans. 1972) collected previously published short essays on popular culture topics with an extended pioneering essay on semiotics, "Myth Today." Barthes explains that mass communication images have both a literal, direct, denotative meaning and a connotative one, essentially an ideological one. In his most memorable example, he discusses the cover of a French illustrated weekly magazine, *Paris-Match*, with the image of a young soldier saluting.



Paris-Match cover ([click for enlarged version](#))

“And here is now another example: I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor [the French flag]. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier.”

Lost in the displacement across national cultures and time, Anglophone readers often have missed what would have been obvious to the French audience of 1957. France was in a moment of crisis, having withdrawn from Vietnam in military defeat in 1954 and with an ongoing process of decolonization underway, especially in Algeria with a rising national liberation struggle. Thus the image of the young



WAYS OF SEEING

JOHN BERGER

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.

But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.



The Surrealist painter Magritte commented on this always-present gap between words and seeing in a painting called *The Key of Dreams*.
The way we see things is affected by what we

soldier balanced rather precariously on the historical moment. The caption identifies the fellow as from Ouagadougou (now the capital of Burkina Faso, then French Upper Volta) and thus makes him representative of a relatively peaceful and slow transition there. (Full independence was achieved in 1960 for the landlocked Central African nation.) And he can remain an image of loyalty to France in a time of insurgent warfare in Algeria. This magazine cover also has a resonance often ignored by Anglophone readers: the French model of colonization made colonial subjects French. School children in Ouagadougou would be doing exactly the same lessons as children in Lyon, Paris, and Marseille on the same day. Unspoken by Barthes (and unnecessary for a French reader in 1957) is this larger historical/political context: that is, it is what the reader brings to the image, not only to decipher what is seen but to frame it within “what everyone knows” or “what is taken for granted.”

2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

British art critic John Berger’s 1972 book summarized and extended his four part BBC television series of the same name. The best popular introduction to the core ideas of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the book uses extensive illustration to make clear the way images must be understood in an historical and cultural context. Cleverly moving from “masterpiece” Western oil paintings through lithographed reproductions and commercial advertising, Berger shows the ideological underpinnings of art. Against the dominant art history’s formal and aesthetic approach, Berger uses a historical and sociological critique to understand landscape, portrait, and the female nude painting in Western art since the Renaissance.

The hard-to-find original TV series includes a stunning and hilarious opening, tweaking the beak of solemn BBC presentations by pompous experts, and includes a ground-breaking roundtable with early Second Wave feminists on representations of women. Berger continued to write important essays on photography (and other visual arts) in books such as *About Looking*, *The Sense of Sight*, and *Understanding a Photograph*.

3. Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*

This 1976 study by the brilliant sociologist of nonverbal social communication presents a detailed breakdown of how advertising presents gender norms as “natural.” Richly illustrated with ads, Goffman explains how gender display is managed by framing, relative size, gestures of touch, function raking, the family image and ritualized subordination. The analysis cuts two ways: while ostensibly about the artifice of advertising illustration, it also functions as a critique of everyday home and workplace gender discrimination.

4. Guy Gauthier, *Initiation à la sémiologie de l’image*

A hard-to-find item, and in French to boot, Gauthier’s booklet provided a clear and thorough introduction to image semiology. With an introduction by Christian Metz, it appeared as an out of series single item from *La Revue du cinéma: Image et son* in 1972. Subsequently, parts of it circulated in an English translation accompanied by slides for teaching from the British Film Institute Education Department. That iteration seems to have more or less disappeared [I found one copy through WorldCat, in Australia.]

However, it remains a classic of clear analysis and thorough breakdown of images in mass communication, following the French tradition of very close rhetorical analysis. Gauthier methodically goes through the elements of images, image and text, advertising, publicity, how an image can become iconic, and how contrasting



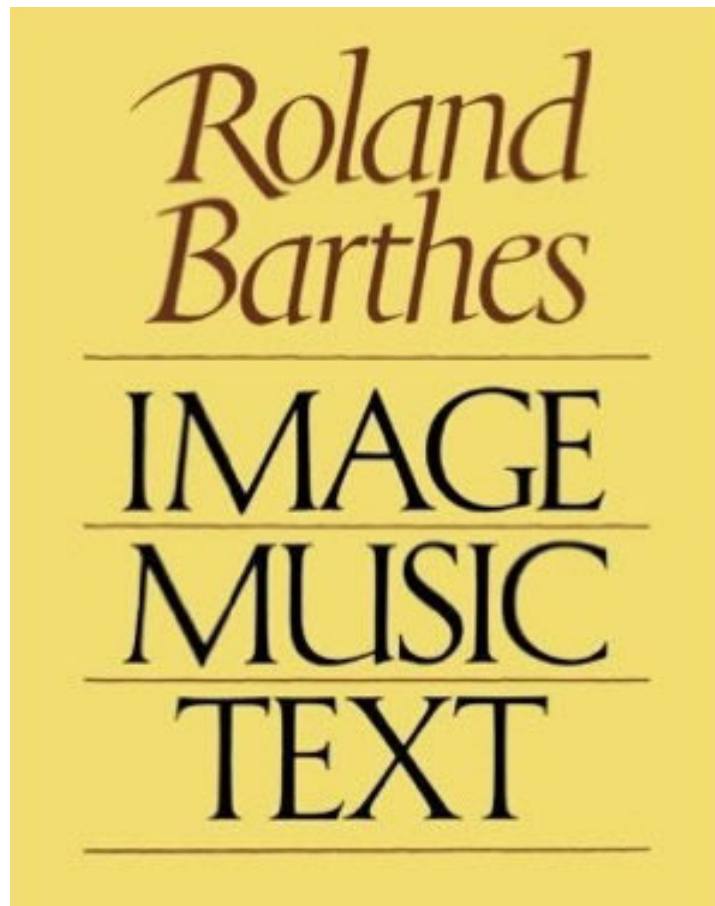
INITIATION A LA SEMIOLOGIE DE L'IMAGE

HORS-SÉRIE ADV 11 10 F

images of the same event or the same image in two different contexts can mean different things. Though the images analyzed were very topical c. 1972, once the argument is grasped, the general forms discussed can be easily applied to contemporary examples.

5. Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Image” and “Rhetoric of the Image”

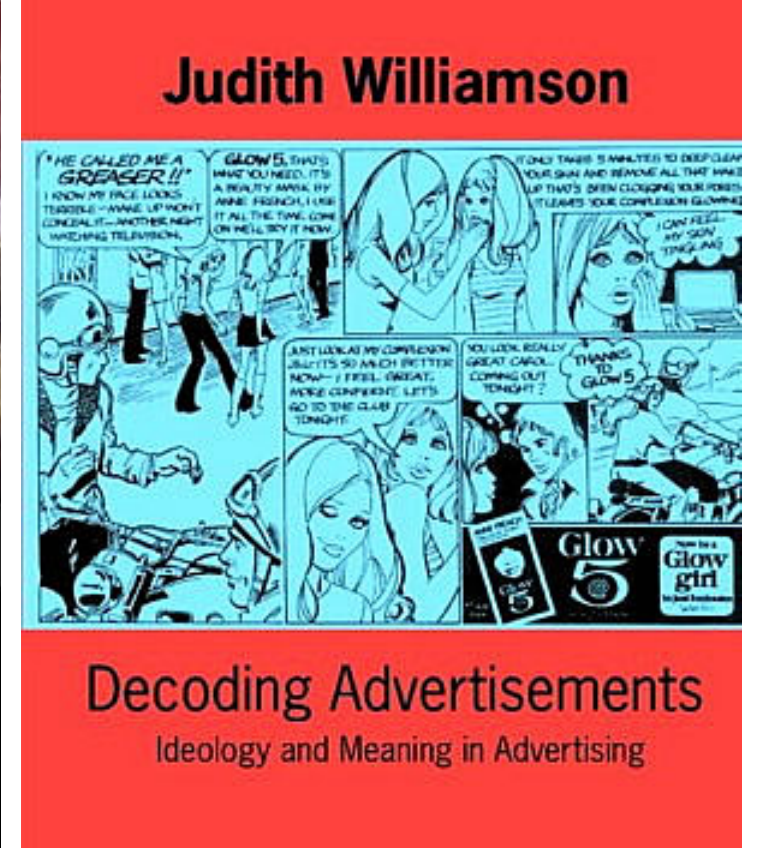
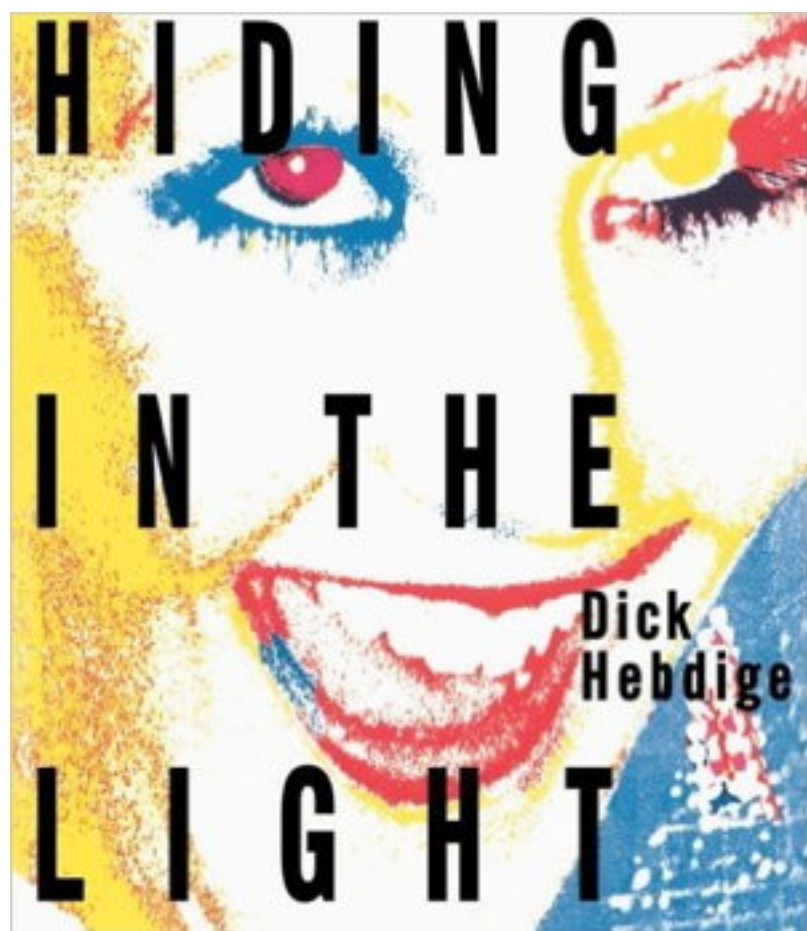
in *Image-Music-Text*: essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (1977).



In two key essays from the early 1960s, Barthes extends his semiotics of the image. The first addresses press photography of news and the second deciphers advertising (in this case, for Italian pasta).

6. John A. Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1983)

Following Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Walker's short book continues and updates the argument with special attention to modern artists who reflected on mass culture and mass reproduction in art.



7. Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*

(London: Marion Boyars, 1978)

In a more academic vein than the previous mentioned works, Williamson advances the argument with more explicit and feminist discussion using Althusser's concept of ideology and (modest) Lacanian psychoanalysis.

8. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*

(London: Routledge, 1988)

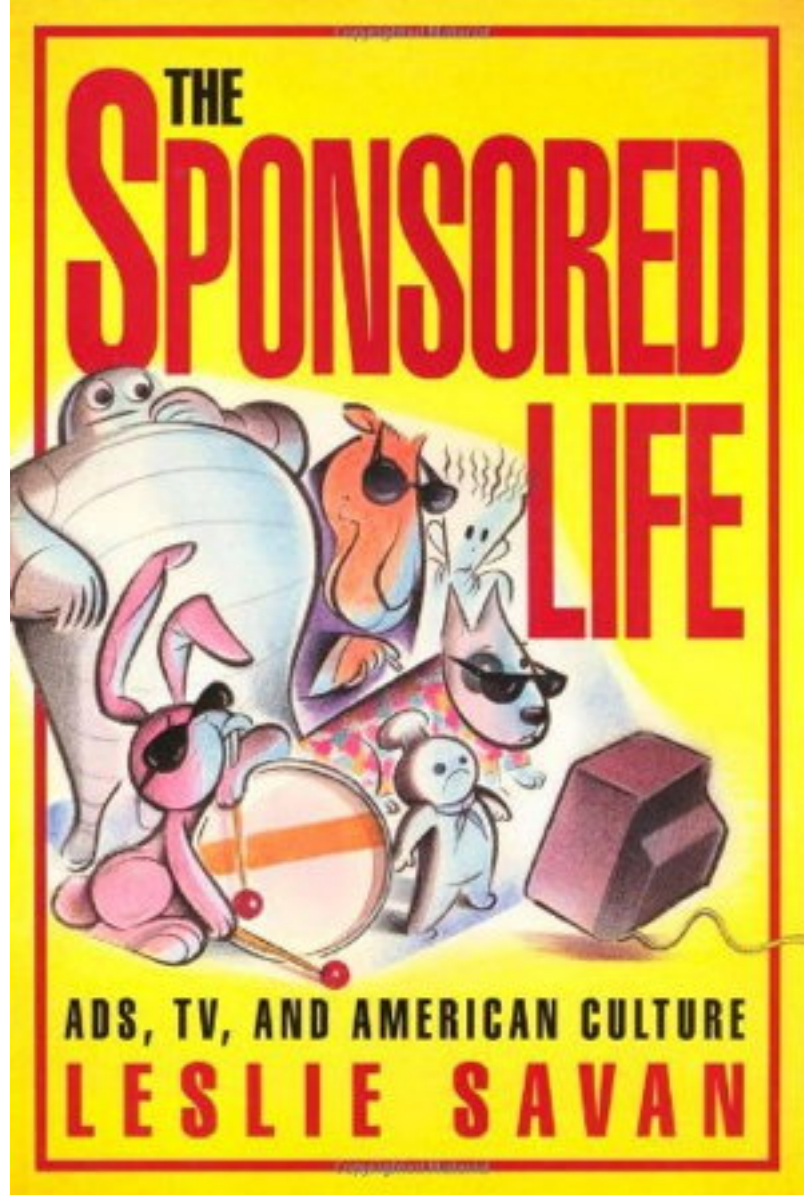
Following on his landmark cultural studies book *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige collects heavily illustrated essays on visual culture, especially youth expressions in the UK. Throughout the 1980s British Cultural Studies work by thinkers such as Richard Dyer and Angela McRobbie pushed visual media discussion into new terrain.

9. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photography and Histories*

(Amherst, U of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Tagg's historical investigation of photography underlined its contribution to surveillance and its way of framing political policies. This is a much more sophisticated discussion of photography expanded in the 1980s with many new voices joining in. The monthly periodical *Afterimage* from Rochester's Visual Study Workshop covered the field throughout the period and provides a useful starting point for surveying what happened.

10. Leslie Savan,



The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture
(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994)

Advertising columnist for *The Village Voice* in the later 1980s and early 1990s, Savan wrote smart, short, and pertinent analyses of new TV commercials, advertising campaigns, and other parts of visual culture. (The essay on the Helvetica typeface is a classic.) Skeptical of commerce, Savan questions implied and explicit racism and sexism in the ad world. The techniques and details of the ad business have always been endlessly and self-consciously discussed in the trade press (in journals such as *Ad Week* and *Advertising Age*; something missed by most commentators on the *Mad Men* series). Savan explains it for those outside the trade.

11. Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*
(London: Sage, 1997)

An excellent textbook on the subject, created for the UK's Open University. Hall's introductory essay and his chapter on racial representations are especially clear introductions to the issues at hand. Also pertinent here are two films based on lectures by Hall: *Race, the Floating Signifier* and *Representation and the Media* (both 1997) distributed by the Media Education Foundation.

12. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Landscapes of Capital: Representing Time, Space, and Globalization in Corporate Advertising*
(Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2011.)

Examining how international neoliberal capitalism represents itself to the world's citizens, the book reveals an ideology in process as transnational corporations try to shape minds as they remake global trade. The book has a supporting website at www.landscapesofcapital.com See also: [Papson's essay in this issue of *Jump Cut*](#).

13. Edmundo Desnoes, "The photographic image of underdevelopment"

translated by Julia Lesage

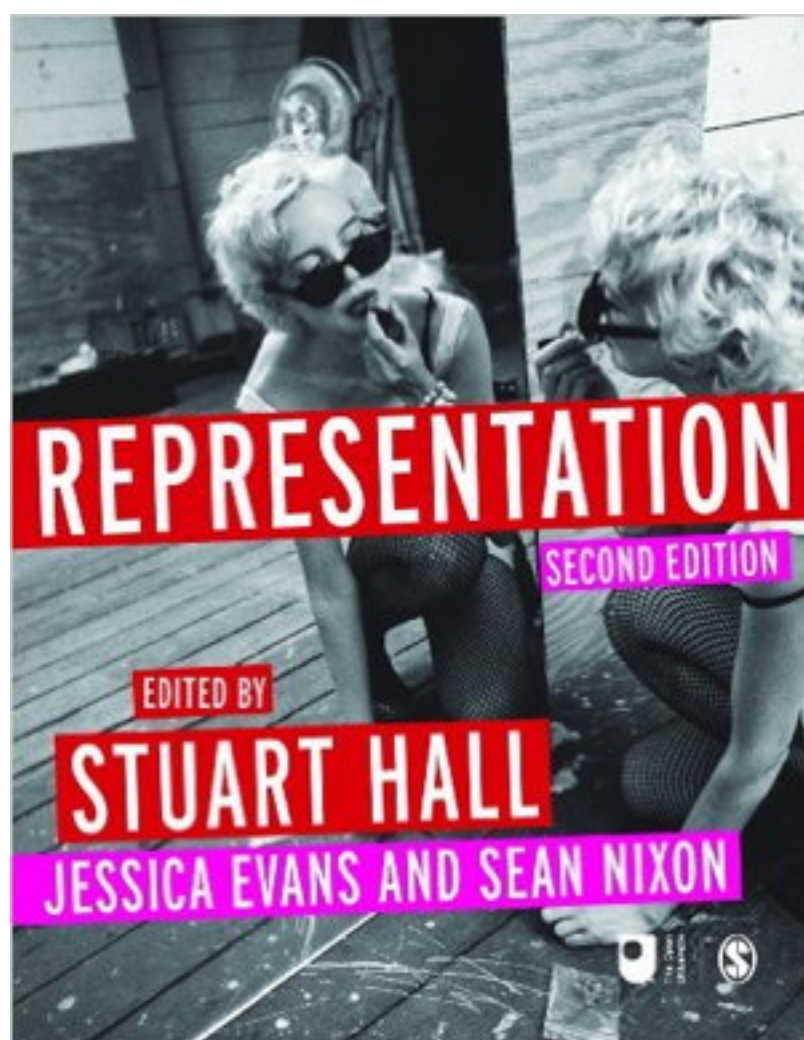
from *Jump Cut*, no. 33, Feb. 1988, pp. 69-81

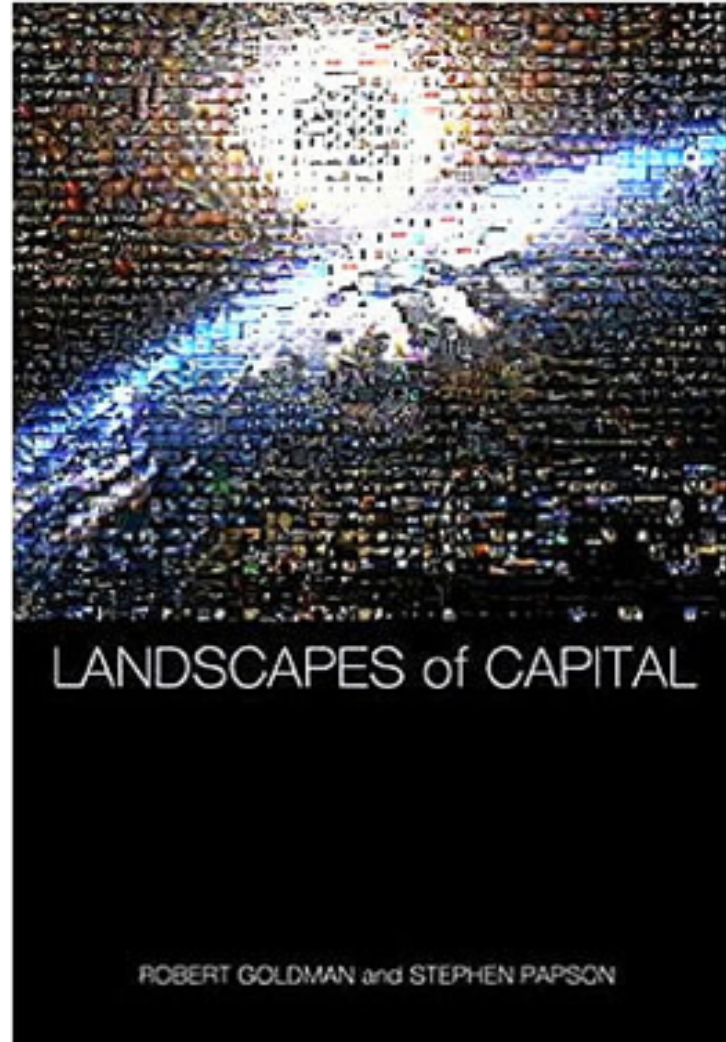
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC33folder/photoUndvtDesnoes.html>

In a classic 1967 essay, Cuban Desnoes presents a foundational analysis of how the developed world presents the developing world.

I've bracketed out here visual studies of narrative forms, a topic worth taking up on another occasion. Most visual studies education begins with analysis of single still images. Of course, there are now extended lines of discussion regarding gender and race/ethnic representations. Ecology and environmental representation is another more recent development. Moving image analysis adds another layer of complexity. Visual image analysis is often implicit or explicit in treatments of certain perennial themes—such as images of war, or natural or human disasters—because of the comparison and contrast built into collections of images.

Recent technologies continue to change the field. The expansion of channels and platforms multiplies the presence and availability of images. Digital photography and smartphones open the terrain. For example, the currently active U.S. media scene in television political satire (such as the *Daily Show*) often contrasts new statements by public figures with earlier ones that produce comic contradictions.





[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 57](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).